

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 1

Article 17

2009

Religion as a Framework of the Nomos

Katie Vaillancourt
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vaillancourt, Katie (2009) "Religion as a Framework of the Nomos," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol1/iss1/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Religion as a Framework of the Nomos
Katie Vaillancourt

Clifford Geertz writes, "... Is the comparative study of religion condemned to mindless descriptivism and an equally mindless celebration of the unique? ... I think not..." Worthwhile study does not end with the pronouncement of "some transcending similarity in the content of or form of religious experience or behavior from one people or one person to another." (Geertz 55). According to Geertz, "The central task is to discover, or invent, the appropriate terms of comparison, the appropriate frameworks within which to view material phenomenally disparate in such a way that its very disparateness leads us into a deeper understanding of it" (Geertz 55). By blending Clifford Geertz, author of *Islam Observed*, and Peter Berger, author of *The Sacred Canopy*, a formula for proceeding with a worthwhile study of disparate religious experiences along with a meaningful purpose for the resulting conclusions, can be laid out. Clifford Geertz argues that the most effective way to study religion is not by studying societies to supplement predetermined generalizing definitions, but to discover, find, and invent if necessary, definitions based on in-depth observations of the details that make a society what it is. Berger developed a functional vocabulary to describe the various components of study without the preexisting notions attached to words in common use. Berger and Geertz set out a sort of flowchart of human social and religious developmental milestones and likely paths observed over time and geography. Geertz uses the evolution of the practice of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia as such a religious study because they present a strikingly diverse developmental path with relatively clear cause and effect components. Using Geertz's methodology and Berger's vocabulary it is easy to compare how these two societies developed to form such drastically different versions of theoretically the same religion, Islam, and follow these differences through the geopolitical environments that resulted. By looking at the details of the socially constructed modes of practicing religion this "very disparateness" guides us to the understanding of how the purpose of these religions in their respective societies are similar. Looking at and comparing the particulars allows one to create a general theory, definition or operational flow chart of how religion contributes to the stability of a population. Such a theory can then be applied as a predictive framework for other cultures like our own in the United States.

In the first chapter of *Islam Observed*, Geertz outlines his approach to the academic study of religion. "First, the mere story of what came after what and when must be at least generally outlined; without sequence, descriptions of the past are catalogs or fairy [tales]" (Geertz 20). In the terms of Berger, one must understand the events a particular society's "nomos", or a society's "meaningful order...imposed upon the discrete experiences or meanings of individuals" (Berger 19) constitutes. Geertz shares a similar idea when he paraphrases Malinowski, "common sense consists of a body of assumptions, some of them conscious but the bulk merely taken for granted, about the way things in the simple nature of the case are—about what is normal and what is not, what is reasonable and what is not, what is real and what is not" (Geertz 93). Furthermore, because religion is a legitimation of a society's nomos, one must understand

exactly what the nomos contains to understand the purpose a religion is serving.

The second step is to put together all of the events and cultural objects that were defined in the first step, to understand the society's view of the nomos. Once one identifies which events need to be given meaning and order in society, one can determine how that society "nomizes" such events. This can be accomplished through looking at the "cultural vehicles" used to add meaning to such things, which constitutes the final step. Such cultural vehicles are used to give "the humanly constructed nomoi cosmic status" (Berger 36). "Finally...the sort of social order in which such ideas could and did seem to almost everybody to be not merely appropriate but inevitable...must be depicted and analyzed"(Geertz 20).

Berger and Geertz agree that religion is a formation used to legitimate the nomos of a society. This concept is first mentioned in Berger's second chapter, "Religion and World- Maintenance." He talks about the inherent precariousness in the nomos of a society, because people will by nature question the socially dubbed realities. Questioning and reevaluating the nomos shakes the status quo, leading to alternative paths on the developmental flow chart of the society. Following each shake up a society will either return to the previous nomos or evolve and solidify a new one. Berger says the first step in solidifying the nomos is socialization, which "seeks to ensure a continuing consensus concerning the most important features of the social world" (Berger 29). He goes on to introduce legitimation as a process that serves to stabilize the social order where socialization is not sufficient. He defines legitimation as the answers to the "why" of socially objectivated knowledge (Berger 29). Religion is a form of such legitimation. It answers this question by both defining what is reality and what is not and by giving one meaning to his experiences. Geertz shares this understanding in his final chapter, "The Struggle for the Real." After quoting Malinowski's version of Berger's nomos, Geertz adds extra meaning to this concept in terms similar to legitimation. "...common sense...is indeed prior to the understanding of religion in such a way, a different way of looking at. This is not because religion is a disguised extension of common sense, as Malinowski would have it, but because...it springs from a perception of the insufficiency of common sense notions to the very task to which they are dedicated: making sense out of experience" (Geertz 93-94).

Geertz's proposed final step is to observe the actual social constructs used to enforce the legitimating purpose of religion in a society. Both Geertz and Berger are faced with the challenge of looking at an almost purely subjective internal experience in the light of their respective empirical sciences, anthropology and sociology. Geertz and Berger both emphasize that in order to study religion scientifically, one must find a way to bypass the subjective while still maintaining a relatively accurate view of how religion helps individuals. Both decide that it is most productive to look at the socially developed rituals and symbols which maintain not only the plausibility structure of the religion but also serve the purpose of "[recalling] the traditional meanings embodied in the culture and its major institutions" (Berger 40). Acting out religious ritual allows one to not only feel part of a history of religious behavior, giving meaning to their everyday lives and the "marginal situations" they may face like death and tragedy, but also are a constant reminder of the legitimating power of the religion (Berger 42). By looking at the aspects

of life these systems address, one can understand the what, how, and why of religious legitimations.

With this process in mind, we can now look at Morocco and Indonesia in the light of Geertz's study to understand the significance of such societies in this context. First, the most interesting part of these cultures, and what makes them a perfect example to use in this instance, is their very unique practices of what is assumed to be a universal religion, Islam. In consideration of Geertz's process, we will start by addressing the major historical and cultural differences between these two societies that make up their *nomoi*, and how their forms of religion and religious symbols reflect the society's need to legitimate their *nomos*. By looking at the particulars of these societies, we can come to a conclusion about their general similarities and what this says about religion in general.

Moroccan Islam took shape simultaneously with the formation of the Moroccan culture's flow chart or series of historical events, allowing Islam to gain a strong grip in its incorporation in the developing Moroccan way of life before other practices could take hold. The age of Berber Islam began over the first three centuries of Moroccan Islam's existence. As a series of rising and falling dynasties developed, and Moroccan civilization as one of Islam formed, a unique society of two conflicted economic worlds came to be: one of tribes occupying the mountainous edges, and one of farmers occupying the agricultural center. The tribal culture centered around "herding and tillage," while the agricultural culture centered around "trade and craft" (Geertz 5). These were not two completely separate societies though; even today these two cultures remain in violent rivalries with the tribal based agricultural towns continuously changing power between different tribal leaders. Another important factor that keeps Morocco from developing into one unified culture is that Morocco is not the center of the grain-growing world. Because of such a disconnected and vicious tribal culture, Moroccan strength is seen in "force of character and most of the rest [in] spiritual reputation" (Geertz 8). This combination of force of character and spiritual strength is seen in the socially constructed forms of ritual and worship in Morocco. In general, Moroccan Islam is very active, rigorous and dogmatic. Geertz sums up Moroccan Islam as, "...basically the Islam of saint worship and moral severity, magical power and aggressive piety" (Geertz 9). This aggressive dogmatic stability gives the people a sense of power and constancy in their often-unstable *nomos*. However, this conclusion cannot be assumed, according to Geertz, and must be established by observing the cultural constructs of religious plausibility structures, which constitutes the final step of this process.

In contrast to the tribal society of Morocco, Indonesia is a sturdy peasant society revolving around rice cultivation. Indonesia values practicality and industrious hard work. As Geertz articulates, "In Morocco civilization was built on nerve; in Indonesia, on diligence." In order to prosper in the Indonesian society, one must work hard and cultivate as much rice as possible; in the constant political instability and power struggles of Morocco one must be able to show strength and nerve. Another noteworthy difference between the two countries is the stage of the culture's flow chart in which they were introduced to Islam. Both were going through a "plastic period" when Islam was introduced, though Morocco had not yet developed a society while Indonesia was already

grounded in Indic states. Geertz said, “In Indonesia Islam did not construct a civilization, it appropriated one” (Geertz 11). Indonesian Islam reflects both Indonesia’s stability of political and social structure, as well as its Indic roots. The result is a much more vague and malleable form than the firm and dogmatic version of Morocco. Also, Geertz stresses that Indonesian Islam is multi-voiced, meaning there are many different versions based on the individual’s spiritual understanding and needs. Unlike Moroccan Islam, Indonesian Islam is not built on uniformity. This type of Islam is much more philosophical and speculative, as opposed to being used as some kind of aggressive governing principal.

These narratives encompass the foundations of Moroccan and Indonesian Islam respectively. To illustrate the aforementioned differences between these religions, Geertz exercised his second and third step of study by observing how the items of each nomos connected to form certain ways of legitimizing. He mentions two major characters exemplifying their respective society’s versions of legitimation. These two characters, Kalidjaga and Lyusi, are both figures [similar] to Christianity’s Jesus. They each represent the values of their religion and are used as symbols to which many Islamic Indonesians and Moroccans worship in ritual to maintain legitimations.

Kalidjaga is the most important Indonesian Islamic apostle; his conversion experience represents the values of his people and serves as an historical symbol for today’s Indonesian Muslim. The nature of his conversion to Islam is representative of all that Indonesian Islam stands for, and gives meaning to the seemingly disconnected series of events that makes up an Indonesian citizen’s nomos. These values include aspects of Indic tradition characteristic of Indonesia’s conversion as a whole. Such Indic values include a very mystical, yoga-like spiritual conversion, in which one finds his religion in himself by pure will and “psychic discipline.” One of the major differences between Moroccan Islam and Indonesian Islam is that Indonesia already held a firm Indic culture that was enriched by the introduction of Islam. This is seen in the Indic traditions being maintained through the new Islamic faith.

Lyusi is the Moroccan version of Kalidjaga; he represents by conversion and action the Moroccan Islamic values. Unlike Kalidjaga, whose conversion was a very passive yoga-like experience, Lyusi was very active and ritualistic in his conversion. Lyusi was converted and declared to have Baraka, which is a state of spirituality in Morocco that constitutes the main values of a Moroccan Muslim, “...material prosperity, physical well-being, bodily satisfaction, completion, luck, plenitude, and...magical power” (Geertz 44). He gained this status by drinking the water he used to wash the clothing of an ill religious teacher. He was also said to be holy by geneology, a characteristic vital in the strict dogma of Moroccan Islam. Lyusi and Kalidjaga are very helpful in understanding the differences in the overall values and purposes of each religious legitimation structure. An academic can study these figures and understand the values individuals practicing each form of Islam hold and how they go about practicing their religion, which is vital to understanding how religion helps frame and preserve their nomos.

After reviewing the history and social constructs of each civilization one can gain a

general understanding or theory as to what role religion played in the evolution and the current status quo in a particular society. As for current status of Moroccan and Indonesian Islam in response to modernization, “The Moroccan disjunction between the forms of religious life and the substance of everyday life advances almost to the point of schizophrenia. The Indonesia absorption of all aspects of life—religious, philosophical, political, scientific, commonsensical, even economic—into a cloud of allusive symbols and vacuous abstractions is rather less prominent than it was two years ago; but its progress has hardly been halted, much less reversed” (Geertz 116). The forms each religion has taken on reflect the point at which and way in which religion entered the flow chart of the development of each civilization and how that influences the way in which each culture needs to be legitimated. Both the Indonesian and the Moroccan form of Islam are equally valid because they both serve the same purpose, to legitimate the nomos. The interesting issue is the dialectic relationship between the nomos and religion. Geertz argues that when one is born into the already religiously legitimized world, he lives his life forming his experiences to fit the predetermined nomos. In any event, it is clear that in order to maintain social order and to prevent an individual from anomie, religious systems are created to add meaning and legitimation to one’s nomos. In the case of Morocco and Indonesia, it is evident that the very processes that made their forms of Islam unique help one understand how their purposes are similar. This can most effectively be seen by following the most important rule Geertz presents us at the beginning of his book, “...there is no route to general knowledge save through a dense thicket of particulars” (Geertz 22). With this general flowchart to work from, one can input data about his own nomos and take a step back to trace the route to and beyond the current reality of his world.